



Sommer Marsden

*THE
ANNIVERSARY
PARTY*

Whiskey Creek Press
www.whiskeycreekpress.com

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by
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WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT

THE ANNIVERSARY PARTY

"This author has given us an excellent tale filled with great family love, priceless dialogue, erotic sex and a love story that's easy to get emotionally involved in."

Dee Dailey

The Romance Studio

Rating: five hearts

"Bravo to Sommer Marsden for penning a sensual love story that will touch the hearts of readers!"

Jennifer

Wild on Books

Rating: four bookmarks

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Dedication

For my "research assistant".

He had no idea what he was getting himself into when he said, "I do".

But I think he's having fun ... XOXO

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Chapter 1

"Kylie, Terri Sinclair here. I just wanted to RSVP for your parents' party. I had a quick question, so give me a call. Can't wait for the surprise!"

Kylie set her groceries on the counter, giving up any hope of grabbing the phone before Mrs. Sinclair hung up. She'd call her back once the food was put away. The anniversary party was going to give her ulcers. She was sure of it.

"You're fine. Just breathe, Kylie. Do your yoga breathing. If that doesn't work, have a glass of wine," she mumbled and slammed a bottle of Chardonnay on the counter. "Jesus, now I'm talking to myself." She hit the memory button for Fawn's work number and cradled her cell phone to her ear.

"Fawn's Designs," her sister sang into the phone with more confidence than Kylie ever could have mustered. Fawn sounded as if she headed a mega corporation when in reality she ran a one-woman show.

"I just wanted you to know that I have hit the point where I am talking to myself." Fawn laughed loudly and Kylie held the phone away from her ear. Her sister could find humor in everything. Damn her. "It's not funny."

"Would you please calm down about this whole thing?"

Fawn soothed. "It is really no big deal. We'll have all their friends over. The family will come. We'll surprise the hell out of them and then the usual."

"The usual?"

"We eat, drink, and be merry! They think they're coming to your house for a housewarming, so the surprise part is taken care of. Where's the stress in that?"

Kylie fought the urge to beat her cell phone against the counter. It would serve Fawn right to have an eardrum blown out. While she ran her design company, Kylie worked from home. It was easy for her baby sister to dump the majority of the prep work on Kylie. *You're home all day. I have to go to the office. You can send your work in on the Internet any time you want ...* Kylie eyed the phone and shook her head. Best not to destroy a two hundred dollar phone when what she really wanted to do was wring Fawn's slender neck.

"Let's see. There would be the food, the booze, the cake, the gift. All the friggin' RSVPs I am quickly losing track of. About a billion distant relatives calling to ask if I have any gift suggestions. Gift suggestions! I barely know my name these days and I don't know what the hell *I'm* getting them. How am I supposed to give gift suggestions?"

"Breathe!"

"Shut up, Fawn! Here's the deal. You are now in charge of the booze. That would be several kegs of microbrew and wine. Do. Not. Buy. Hard. Liquor. I can't stress that enough. If you show up with whiskey and vodka, I'll have half the family camping out. Especially Uncle Bob. He can't handle his liquor but he sure thinks he can. I do not want to wake up to Uncle Bob sleeping on my sofa in his Scooby-Doo boxer shorts. Once was enough, thanks."

"That was ten years ago." Fawn giggled.

"It still haunts me. Now I have to go call Terri Sinclair back and answer whatever question it is she has. Most likely she'll want a gift suggestion."

"Wait!" Fawn screeched as Kylie started to disconnect.

"What?"

"What kind of beer? What kind of wine? I don't have time to do all this. I have to work."

"Well so do I, darling. I have assignments backed up so far I'm about to hyperventilate. Get any kind of beer you want. Ask the guys at The Liquor Stop for suggestions. They drink beer all day. They'll know what's good. As for wine—duh! Red, white, and blush. Cover all the bases. Now I really have to go. I have a shitload to do and no time to do it. See ya later, toots!"

She hung up and took a deep breath. *Wow!* She felt a little better. This had been Fawn's bright idea and although she loved her parents dearly and wanted to do something special for them, she hadn't planned on hosting it herself. Her house was still new to her. She'd worked her ass off to earn the money for it. Then worked even harder to get it the way she wanted it. The thought of forty-some people wandering around and touching everything nearly made her skin crawl.

"You're a nut," she said. "And for God's sake, stop talking to yourself!"

* * * *

Kylie watched the sun begin to set. She eyed the cake she had made so lovingly. She really had to hand it to herself. She'd pulled off a miracle this afternoon. She'd managed a two-tiered anniversary cake, cleaned the upstairs, and sent in three of her writing assignments. Her editor had even sent a congratulatory email. Seemed all the pressure was bringing out the aggressive writer in her. Marcia had loved the interviews and given her an assignment she'd been itching for. All in all, a good day.

As the pinks and blues of the sky toned down to a deep purple, Kylie poured herself a nice cold glass of wine. She had definitely earned it. The first sip was cool, fruity heaven. She felt the old familiar craving for a cigarette. Closing her

eyes, she took a deep breath and let the craving pass. If she could survive this party without cracking, she would forever be a nonsmoker. No doubt about it. If this stress didn't break her, she couldn't be broken.

The phone gave its customary burble and Kylie sighed. Most likely her sister from the liquor store. *What kind of beer? Dark? Light? Red? What kind of wine? Howmuch? Howmany bottles would we need?* She could hear all the inane questions in her head before she even picked up the receiver. Kylie steeled herself. Best to be calm and patient. She wouldn't get a lick of work out of Fawn if she let loose on her.

"Yes?" she said with mock amusement.

"Hello? Kylie?"

"Mrs. Sinclair!" Kylie stammered. "I'm so sorry. I thought for sure it was Fawn. I didn't mean to be rude ... I mean—" Kylie let loose a deep sigh and started again. "I apologize, how are you?"

Terri Sinclair laughed. Her laugh sounded the same as it had when Kylie was a child. The Sinclairs were her parents' oldest friends. She hadn't talked to them in years. Not since Wade had gone off. The thought alone sent a brief stab of pain through Kylie.

She was too old to feel that way, she reprimanded herself. Too old to still have teenage hang-ups.

"I am fine, my darling. And how are you? Having a hard time getting Fawn to pull her weight? Let me guess, this was all her idea. And you, sweetie, got the honor of doing all the hard work."

Kylie sipped her wine and couldn't repress a giggle. "You do remember her well, don't you?"

"Both of you, sweetie. I just haven't seen you in ages. I heard this shindig is at your new house. I'm so excited to see it. Carol says it's marvelous."

Kylie allowed herself to take it all in again. Yes, it was. And it was all hers. The two-hundred-year-old farmhouse. White, of course. Six bedrooms. Two fireplaces. A wrap-around porch. The house of her dreams.

"Are you reveling as we speak?" Terri asked, pulling her in from her daydream.

"I'm sorry! Yes, I was. I'll admit it to you, Mrs. Sinclair. I was gaping again. Not a day goes by that I don't gape."

"From what your mother says, you deserve to gape. She said she wasn't so sure about it when you bought it. I believe the phrase she used was 'a piece of doodie'."

"I'm sure Mom didn't use that word," Kylie laughed.

"No, you're right. She used the other word. You'll have to forgive me but I still think of you and Fawn as impressionable young girls."

"Fawn maybe." Kylie sighed, sipping her wine. "Not me. I'm too old for people to impress anything upon me I don't want."

Terri's laughter wafted in her ear again. "Yes. You are ancient, Kylie. What are you now? Twenty-seven?"

"Twenty-nine," Kylie corrected.

"Ah. Forgive me. Anyway, if I still know your sister's work ethic, I'm sure you're swamped. I just had one quick question and then I'll let you get back to the million things awaiting your attention."

"Shoot," Kylie said, settling in her new sofa. Chocolate brown. Overstuffed. Heaven on earth. "But if you're going to ask me what you can get them, I haven't a clue. I don't even have a gift yet."

"Oh, I was going to get them a gift certificate for that new Celtic shop. Your mother eats up her Irish heritage with a spoon. I figured she could find some pretty collectible for the house."

"Perfect," Kylie sighed. "In fact, I may even go there to get my gift. You're a lifesaver."

"Always glad to help. Now! On to my question..." Terri Sinclair hesitated as Kylie sat in silence.

"What is it, Mrs. Sinclair? You can ask me anything."

"I was wondering—" Terri cleared her throat and Kylie felt a sinister nervousness uncoil low in her belly. It couldn't be. She wouldn't. Impossible. "Well, you see, Wade is in town. He's out of the military now and he came home to see Dana's baby. You know we're grandparents now. It's so wonderful." The woman rambled on excitedly but the nervousness was evident in her voice. "I'm not asking if Dana can come, of course. The baby's only a week old. She's not up to parties yet and the baby shouldn't be exposed to all those people. Especially now. Cold and flu season, you know. But Wade. Yes, Wade is in town and I know he'd love to see everyone. Your parents are very important people to him. Always treated him like a son. So," she took an audible breath and then sighed, "would you be able to handle that, dear?"

Kylie opened her mouth. Closed it. Opened it again. Words refused to come. *Wade? In town? He was here.* A shiver skittered up the nape of her neck. Her scalp crawled. A deep open wound blossomed in her stomach. An ache so deep it was if a black hole resided in her midsection. "Of

course," she squeaked before her brain kicked in. "He's welcome to come. I can't wait to see him."

Dead silence. Just breathing. It was as if Terri was as surprised as Kylie herself. *Welcome? Can't wait to see him!* The bastard had left her. Pledged his undying love. Taught her all about love, sensuality. Helped her find her own sexuality and desire. Then he was gone. Overnight. Poof! Like a bad magic trick.

"Well, thank you, Kylie. I really do appreciate it. I know it can't be easy—"

"It's fine!" Kylie barked. It came out a tad more forcefully than she intended. "I mean, it's been ages, Mrs. Sinclair. I think we've all grown up. Life goes on and all that. I'll be fine. Really."

"Thank you, Kylie." Terri sighed and then said her goodbyes. As she hung up, Kylie was sure the other woman had known the truth. Had known she was lying through her teeth.

* * * *

His hands were on her. Large, broad hands that anchored her hips solidly to his. His thick cock nestled snugly in the crack of her ass as he pushed against her. The hands wandered, traveled the smooth soft flesh of her belly, traced the outline of her hips. He arched against her and she could

feel how eager he was. How very ready he was to dip into the needy moisture between her thighs. Those callused hands cupped her breasts, smoothed over the side-swells. Plucked her nipples into perfect erection.

She sighed out her pleasure, relishing the soft but strong feel of his hands moving over her. His lips brushed the nape of her neck, bringing all the tiny hairs to attention. He kissed along her hairline and stopped to trace the fragile shell of her ear. "I will love you forever, Kylie," he whispered and she shivered. "I can't wait to get on with life with you. Doing this every night. Marriage. Babies. I will want you till the day I die. *Need* you till the day I die," he said on a kiss and then he was in her. Sliding into her with one long thrust. His cock brushed the sweetest spots.

She felt a rush of pure pleasure, pure wanting. They moved together in a perfect dance, his thrusts every bit urgent and aggressive. The pure male need evident in his movements ratcheted her pleasure higher. And when he became frantic, expressing himself with nothing more than grunts and harsh hisses of air, she felt her own pleasure unfurl like brightly colored ribbons in her mind. Her body followed, swimming in a haze of pleasure so intense it walked the fine line of pain. He pumped inside her as her pussy quivered. She milked each drop of his seed, enveloped each thrust of his cock until there was no more to be had. He was all she ever wanted. This. Here. With him. Forever...

Kylie sat up in bed. The sheets fell away from her shivering body. She wiped her forehead and her hand came away covered in cool, clammy sweat. Her heart pounded and a smaller, more frantic pulse had started in her sex. She flung the covers back and stood, grabbing the nightstand for support. Her knees felt rubbery and she put her head down to clear the woozy feeling that threatened to send her sinking to the floor.

Wade. Damn Wade.

She hadn't had the dreams in ages. Had healed. Or so she thought. But here he was again tonight. Fucking her. Taking her. Making her love him.

"I don't love him," she growled in the dark. But down in the deepest part of her, she knew it was a lie. She had always loved him. Hated him too these past few years. Despite the hate, though, the love had survived. And now she had to see him. Be in the same room with him. She would have to survive the embarrassment. The twitters and whispers.

That's Wade. At one time Wade and Kylie were an item. We all swore they'd end up together. We were sure they would settle down and start a family. Then one day, Wade up and left! Joined the Army. Left Kylie broken-hearted and lifeless. That girl wasn't right for at least a year. Then they would tsk and shake their heads and pity her.

Kylie sank to the bed and hugged herself. The sweat had started to dry and a chill swept over her. She shivered in the dark and wrapped the damp sheet around her shoulders. She would have to bite the bullet. Not let the pity and the gossip get to her. She would hide her feelings. Hide her anger. She could do it.

The pulse between her legs beckoned. It hadn't let up in the slightest despite the calming of her heartbeat.

"Great. Not only does he leave me. He comes into my dreams, gets me all worked up, and leaves me horny." She sighed and then she was laughing. Half laugh. Half sob.

Her fingers found her clit and moved in gentle circles. Her body instantly responded. A pleasant, half-forgotten warmth spread through her. It had been too long since she had experienced any kind of physical pleasure. Kylie fingered the delicate organ harder. She thrust a finger into her weeping sex. Not enough. She needed more. A second joined the first, a third joined the second. She sat on the edge of the bed, legs spread wide as she worked herself. Her motions grew harsh and demanding as her thighs trembled. She hooked the trio of fingers, stimulating her G-spot with a come-hither motion. She stroked her clit harder, tighter circles, firmer pressure. This need was overwhelming. The need for orgasm. The need to purge the demons from her dreams. The need for release.

Kylie let out a harsh bark of laughter in the dark. Quickly the laughter turned to an echoing sob. Her body shook as her thrusting fingers became more frenetic. She forced them into her in an almost angry tempo. She was powerless to stop it. Unable to rein in her scattered emotions. She was driven purely by the intense animalistic desire to come. And she did. Tears streaming down her cheeks as her skin began to tingle and then heat. The first warm rolling lick of pleasure coursed through her and as her body bowed beneath the orgasm, she cried.

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Chapter 2

"I don't see what the big deal is." Fawn sighed. "You're both adults now. It's not like you're lovesick teenagers anymore. You are over him, right?"

Kylie bit her lip and thanked her lucky stars that she was talking to Fawn on the phone. She would have choked her sister by now if they'd been in the same room together.

"Right, Kylie?" Fawn nagged.

"Yes!" Kylie nearly shouted. "Right! I'm over him. I've been over him for a long time," she lied. "I just think it will be awkward is all."

"Ah, you've done awkward before. No big deal. There's going to be close to fifty people there. You might see him once or twice all night."

"Fifty!? I thought the total at last count was about forty." Silence. "Fawn, what have you done?" She sighed, too tired to shout.

"Not me. Aunt Marie. She called me the other day and said she had invited the Marshalls, Sue and Tom Weiss, Marilyn and Gil Dubois, and a few others. What was I supposed to say?"

"How about you learn to say no! You know she only called you because I would have told her to take a hike. Now it's fifty. Fifty! Fifty people wandering through my house." *Fifty people whispering behind my back as I try not to lose my mind.*

"It is a party, sissy. You know. Lots of people? Fun? When did you get so uptight?"

"When will you grow up?" Kylie snapped and slammed the phone down. She knew she was taking her frustration out on Fawn. Her sister's intentions were good. She wanted to have a big party to celebrate their parents' thirty years of devotion. Thirty years of happy marriage was a friggin' miracle these days. The problem with Fawn was despite her admirable ability to come up with brilliant ideas, she was unwilling to put in the hard work to make them a reality. That's why her little design firm would always be little. She did just enough to skate by.

And you are an overachiever. You do too much and are never satisfied. There's no happy medium with you.

Enough self-analysis! She had grocery shopping to do. Kylie shut the door as the phone started to ring. That would be Fawn, whining about how she'd hurt her feelings. That was tough. They weren't kids anymore and sometimes the truth hurt. Kylie shut her cell phone off as she started the

car. If Fawn wanted to whine she would have to do it on voice mail. Then Kylie could listen to it when she didn't feel so homicidal.

She found her favorite radio station and cranked up the volume. Her heart sank a little as she sang along with Otis Redding.

Her dreams from the night before filled her head as she drove. Wade's hands. His lips on her skin. How warm and soft his lips had been. His cock buried deep in her eager body. Thrusting and riding her as his hands cupped her breasts, tickled at her nipples until she shuddered. She could almost feel his breath snake across her skin. Her pussy responded to the mental barrage and her heart ached to the point of pain as the song's sad words filled her head.

She had been doing so well. Had been so far beyond the pain of losing Wade. Now he was back and she had returned to square one. Surviving. Functioning with what felt like the equivalent of a mortal chest wound.

"Were you really over him, though?" she spoke out loud in the car. She met her own eyes in the rearview mirror. Eyes that were bloodshot and puffy from lack of sleep and tears. "If you were really over him it wouldn't have been so goddamn easy to bring it all back up. The wound wouldn't have opened right back up at the mere mention of his

name. You've been kidding yourself, Kylie," she whispered. "You weren't over him at all. You'd just learned to bury all the feelings."

She cranked the radio higher and let the melancholy song wash over her. She would simply focus on the task at hand and do her best to stay away from Wade at the party. The less she saw of him, the better off she would be. Kylie stolidly ignored the thump of arousal inside her damp leggings. She had gone without a man this long. She could go a lot longer. Like it or not.

* * * *

She'd been muttering "seedless cucumbers" to herself when the collision occurred. One moment she was wheeling her grocery cart along, the next she was on the floor looking through the metal grid of her cart at her jars of pickles and fresh vegetable.

"I'm so sorry! I didn't—" the man began. Then he stopped cold as Kylie fumed. *Geez!* He couldn't even finish his apology? So intent on feeling like an ass she hadn't looked at him yet. When she finally did, she realized why the apology had died in his throat.

Still lying on the floor and now wishing it would open up and swallow her whole Kylie said, "Wade?"

Of course it was Wade! How could it not be? No other man

had eyes that exact shade of dark chocolate. No other man had hair the exact color of rich espresso. No other man had shoulders that wide and hips that slim. Damn Wade. Wade watching her wriggle on the dirty floor like a cockroach. A cockroach dressed in a tattered sweatshirt and old black leggings. Her long hair shoved under a baseball cap. And no makeup.

He extended his hand and Kylie stared at it stupidly. "Miss Kylie," he whispered. "Why don't you get off the floor, darlin'? Let me help you up."

Kylie was shaken by his use of his teenage nickname for her. So many times he had spoken those words with such obvious affection and need. Kylie felt her mouth open and close. She tried to speak but could only manage a shrill squeak of air. Her mind still busy with the indignity of not only her position but her attire.

Wade squatted down and touched her forehead gently. "You didn't hit your head, did you?"

Kylie felt her stomach do a slow lazy flip. Having Wade this close after all this time was not good for her mental health. She couldn't think or speak. Involuntarily, she heard herself take a disgustingly deep breath, trying to capture the scent of him in her nose. He smelled the same as he did all those years ago. Wood smoke, sandalwood, mountain air, and the distinct essence of man. She felt his callused hands do

another gentle tour over her forehead and she closed her eyes. Her pussy thumped eagerly, apparently forgetting her promise to not give in to her frivolous sexual needs.

"You okay? Kylie?" His voice drifted into her ear. She felt out of sync. Like she was living in some parallel universe. Part real, part memory. "Kylie!"

She opened her eyes and gazed into his. Stared stupidly at his full lower lip, barely resisting the urge to lick it and then follow with a nip. Then Kylie felt it. Even as Wade pushed her hair from her face and cupped her jaw with his broad hand. Her body wanted to respond and turn to mush. Her traitorous body wanted to stoke the flames of arousal until they burned into a full-fledged hunger to be with him. Have him in her.

Instead her anger flared sudden and bright. Her belly warmed with it and her face burned. She wanted to slap him as much as she wanted to kiss him.

"Please get your hands off me, Wade," she hissed. He obliged, pulling back as if she'd bitten him. Kylie struggled up off the floor, so eager to get up and save face that she didn't care how clumsy she looked. "I'm fine. Maybe you should be a little more careful how you're driving that thing!" she snapped.

Wade cleared his throat and shoved his hands deep in his

pockets. He fought a grin and quickly lost. "Actually, darlin', it was *you* who hit *me*."

"What?" she yelped. "That's not true! —" She bit off the end of her sentence. Had she hit him? She'd been so lost in her own little world. So wrapped up in what she needed for the party that wouldn't die that she hadn't been paying much attention to anything but her list.

He nodded with a slight smile, keeping his hands shoved deep in his pockets. She was pretty sure that keeping them trapped was for her benefit.

"Well, I'm sorry. If I hit you, that is. My mind's going in a million different directions at the moment. I guess I wasn't paying much attention to anything."

"Let me guess. You're pretty much flying solo?" He laughed. His dark brown eyes darted over her, taking in every inch of her. Lingering on the swell of her breasts beneath her raggedy sweatshirt then sweeping to the tight leggings that hugged her hips and thighs.

Kylie trembled under his gaze as if she were naked. She tossed her hair and took a deep breath. Trying to control the tremor in her voice she said, "You obviously remember my sister, Fawn. The great and talented planner."

"And you are the great and talented worker bee." Wade laughed. Let loose, his left hand reached out and traced the

arc of her jaw, swept across her lips with a touch so gentle it was barely there. "The beautiful, talented worker bee."

Kylie froze, stunned by his brave and insistent touch. He smoothed the flat of his palm along the fragile skin of her neck and she felt her nipples tighten instantly as zings of pure pleasure skittered over her skin. His blunt-tipped fingers brushed her collarbone and the pulse in her sex increased to a demanding thump. She felt her pussy contract with arousal. Finding a steady rhythm of its own, contracting around nothing. Needy.

Kylie caught his wrist and gently pushed his hand away. There was no reason to be a bitch. No reason to hurl insults or spit venom. She took a long, deep breath and closed her eyes for a second. She had to center herself. She couldn't fall apart because the man had touched her. "Wade," she said on her exhale, "I'd appreciate it if you'd keep your hands to yourself." *Before I come in my pants.*

"Sorry," he said and she expected a smile. Not this time, though. This time his face remained serious. His eyes dark and brooding, his mouth set in a serious line. He looked almost sad and Kylie felt her heart constrict, squeeze with an overwhelming sadness at what could have been. What *should* have been. "Guess I still can't be in the same room with you without wanting to touch you. Old habits die hard. Old needs die harder," he finished, his gaze fixing on his shoes.

Why couldn't he look at her? Kylie almost asked him but decided it better to let sleeping dogs lie. *Why get into an emotional scene in the grocery store?*

Mr. Bernard, the oldest man in Parkville, wheeled his cart down the aisle and stared openly at them. Kylie met his gaze and tried to control the urge to growl at him. He was a nosy old codger and usually unkind to boot.

"Takin' up the whole damn aisle," he snapped, staring openly at Wade. Recognition flashed across his wrinkled face and a cruel smile lit his face. "So the runaway boyfriend returns. Did he come to finish you off?" he cackled. "Break your heart again?"

Kylie swallowed her nasty reply and pushed her cart to the side. "There you go, Mr. Bernard, now you can be on your way!" she said with forced cheer. She would not let this cruel old man reduce her to tears. She'd already fallen on her ass today, she'd be damned if she'd cry.

Mr. Bernard pushed past then turned. "Best to take her to bed or just finish her off, boy," he said, addressing Wade. "That girl weren't right for years after you up and left." Then he turned the corner on a wicked laugh.

Kylie gaped, felt her face flush as her anger flared anew. *Of all the nerve!* And to think she'd controlled her anger in deference to his age.

Wade grimaced like a man in pain. "Kylie, I'm so sorry." He sighed. "I see he's just as nasty as ever."

Kylie flushed hotter under his pity. She would not be pitied by a man who broke his promises and ran away like a scared little boy. "I pretty much ignore people like that, Wade," she snapped. "And just for the record," she lied, "I was perfectly fine once I realized you weren't coming back. I got on with my life." *Liar.*

Wade nodded, his face still sad. Then he smiled with forced cheerfulness. His hand strayed toward her once more but he quickly caught himself and pulled it back. "I hear your dream came true. You're a full-time writer. That's great! Mostly interview, my mom says."

Kylie nodded and drew her shoulders back. Tried to stand up strong and tall in the face of the ghosts of her emotions. Standing in the grocery store having a frivolous conversation with Wade was something she had never imagined. For an instant her mind flooded with the erotic images of her dreams. The full feeling as his cock drove into her. The sweet torturous joy of orgasm.

She shook off the image and forced a smile, though her eyes strayed for just an instant to the faded fly of his jeans. She licked her lips and cleared her throat. "That's right," she almost barked, then consciously controlled her voice. "In

fact, I won the assignment I really wanted. My editor was so impressed with my last two interviews she assigned me the big one."

He raised an eyebrow and leaned against his cart. Kylie studiously ignored his easy sensuality and self-confidence. He was a man completely at ease in his own skin. Not a nervous twitch or shift to be found. "Who's it with?" he asked.

"Some photographer. Goes by 'Pix'. That's it. I guess it's like Cher. Anyway, no one knows his real name. He really is a phenomenal photographer. I've been a huge fan for awhile now," Kylie couldn't help but brag. It felt good to rub her accomplishments in his face. Sad but true. "Americana kind of stuff. Like Norman Rockwell but one step further. Everything from white picket fences to crack dens. The real world around us. The good, the bad and the ugly." She took a deep breath and bit her tongue. That was enough. Any more about the photographer and she'd sound like a stalker.

Wade smiled and nodded. "I think I've heard of him."

"Anyway, Marcia, that's my editor, said he's in town for some reason or another. She assigned me the interview. Thank god she set it up for two days after the party. Otherwise, I might actually go insane. He's done a lot of war photography. Combat stuff. Now he's moving into other

areas. Marcia said there's talk of a book. Current affairs, nature, that sort of stuff."

Wade stuck out his hand and for the second time that day Kylie stared at it stupidly. Stupidity was becoming the theme of the day, she mused. "What's that?"

"Nice to meet you." He laughed.

"What?"

"Nice to meet you, Kylie. I'm Pix."

Kylie hung her head as she half-giggled, half-sighed. Why was this not a surprise? Why was she not the least bit shocked that Pix would turn out to be Wade after that insane rant she had just given on his work? She'd won the assignment. There had to be some kind of rotten twist. Some kind of karma. It seemed the universe had a sick sense of humor.

She stared at her battered running shoes, willing her breathing to stabilize. She would not cry. She would not lose it! If she could talk to him in the grocery store and avoid him at the anniversary party, she could sure as hell sit down and rattle off a bunch of questions to him. She could record his answers and remain emotionally removed. She could!

She felt him near her before his fingers ever touched her. Felt his energy mingling with hers as it had a thousand

times before. He gently touched her chin and just as gently tilted her head back so she would look him in the eyes. Dark chocolate eyes that were so full of kindness, and humor, and something else that eluded her.

"I'm sorry. I had no idea it was you. There have to be more freelance writers in this area than you, right? I really didn't know, Kylie, but it will be fine. We'll get you a really good interview and I'll be as professional as I possibly can. That's one thing the military is really good at beating into you."

"What?" she asked, feeling the heat of his fingers sink into her willing skin. Each nerve in her face drank in his gentle touch.

"How to control your emotions. No matter how strong they are."

And then he kissed her.

Kylie felt her lips part against her wishes. They opened wantonly allowing his tongue to touch hers. Letting it explore each soft inch of her mouth. He nipped the end of her tongue gently and she felt a shiver work through her. Wade grasped her hips and pulled her firmly against him. Her body went forward with fluid ease, her curves melting against the angles of his lean form. A whoosh of air escaped her, a breathy sigh of desire and remembrance. Her tongue helplessly stroked his, meeting him stroke for

stroke as her sex urged her further. She wanted him. Worse than ever. Only Wade could have her acting this way in public. Kissing in the middle of a grocery store for all to see.

His fingers against her waist burned like fire through her sweatshirt. He pulled her flush and she felt his erection, long and hard against her thigh. Another sigh. Another gulp of air. And the kiss continued, an exotic mating ritual of wet eager mouths. His hands cupped her bottom as he pushed gently against her mound. Kylie was both thankful and mortified that her leggings were so old, worn thin by years of washing. A meager cloth barrier between cock and pussy. Her stomach tingled with nervousness and lust.

His cock rode the cleft of her sex, brushing for an instant against her swollen clit. A thrill of pleasure flowed through her as the steady quiver in her slick channel increased. Her body screamed to be stretched and filled by that cock even as her mind screamed for her to run. To pull away and walk out. He had no right to make her want him again. No right at all.

Wade forced his knee between hers and she could feel the lean hard muscle in his thigh. His pressure opened her stance a little wider as he leaned into her body, the heat from him becoming nearly unbearable.

Kylie pulled back. A harsh hiss of air issued from her

parted lips. "Let me go, Wade!" Her voice like broken glass was foreign to her own ears. "Let me go now! I can't do this. It's too much." She arched back before he could release her and half a dozen cans of olives went rolling across the shiny linoleum floor.

Wade ran a hand through his thick hair. It stood in spikes and horns, his eyes shone with confusion and desire. "I'm so sorry, Kylie. I'm so damn sorry. I don't know what got into me. It's just—"

"I don't care!" she said, her voice giving away conflicting emotions. Euphoria. Fear. A steady pulsing rage. Her words trembled out on a rush of air as she straightened her wrinkled sweatshirt, pulling it low on her hips. God only knew if she had a wet spot in the crotch of her nearly threadbare pants. It wouldn't surprise her one bit since the pulse between her thighs was still demanding attention, quivering with an urgent need to be filled, stroked, fucked.

"I have to go," she whispered.

She reclaimed her cart, maneuvered around him, and whisked down the aisle with her head held high. She held her shoulders back, her spine straight. She walked quickly, her vision becoming obscured as the tears came. She didn't look back when he called out.

"Kylie! I'm sorry. I'll see you at the interview. Okay?"

She'd be damned if she would let him see her cry.

* * * *

Wade watched Kylie walk away. He could tell by the way that she held her shoulders back and her spine straight that she was upset. Nothing got Kylie stiff and tall faster than fighting her emotions. He could feel the hurt and pain radiating off her in invisible waves. They hit him like a punch to the solar plexus. Wade shook his head and took a deep breath. He'd done that. Put that pain in her heart, that stiffness in her gait.

His lips still tingled from kissing her and he could smell her scent on his fingers. She still smelled like honeysuckle, still tasted like summer and fruit and sunshine. His stomach sizzled with electricity from touching her. His cock, aching and hard, felt heavy in his jeans from the feel of her tongue sliding over and under and around his.

Wade watched her turn the corner, her auburn hair swishing. She stared ahead of her, spine held ramrod straight. He considered going after her, then rejected the idea. She wasn't ready to talk to him. More importantly, she wasn't ready to listen to him. He deserved this. The torturous arousal, the wounded pride, the brunt of her anger. He deserved every last bit of it. Kylie didn't understand why he had left, and he'd never had the courage to explain to her.

Wade claimed his cart and started in the opposite direction. The least Kylie deserved was to exit the store with some dignity. He hadn't meant to put her in that position. Hell, he hadn't even known she was here. If he had, he might have turned and left to avoid exactly what happened. Being near Kylie made his thoughts chaotic. He thought with his heart instead of his head when she was near. Touching her had been the only thing he could focus on and feeling her lips against his had damn near stopped his heart.

* * * *

She'd forgotten the damned peppers! Kylie had intended to get red, orange, and yellow peppers for her veggie platter but it had slipped her mind as she stormed out of the store. She jotted them down on a pad. She was noting all the stuff she was missing as she went along. The day before the party she fully intended to send her sister to the store. It was one chore Fawn wasn't going to get out of.

The phone rang for the third time since she'd gotten home. Kylie relented and grabbed it from the table. "Yes, Fawn." She sighed.

Laughter tickled her ear and she grinned. "It sounds as if you're frustrated with your sister again," her mother said.

"Sorry, Mom. We had a little tiff earlier and the phone's

been ringing every ten minutes since. I just assumed."

"What are my two girls fighting about now?"

"Nothing!" Then realizing she sounded suspiciously nervous, Kylie forced a sigh. "Just Fawn being Fawn. Sometimes she drives me up the wall. I just need to take a few hours of time off from being her big sister."

"Well, whatever it is she's done, I'm sure she meant well."

"Doesn't she always?" Kylie giggled. "Remember when she attempted a hamster rescue program? We had about thirty allegedly abused and neglected hamsters running wild in the house."

"Yes. I nearly lost your father to a heart attack over that generous act." Carol Walker laughed.

"Dad never did like 'vermin', as he calls them. What's up, Mom? We haven't talked in a while."

"Well," Carol hemmed, "I wanted to invite you to dinner tonight. Your sister will be here of course. I don't have to worry about any dysfunctional family antics, do I?"

Kylie smiled and ran her hands through her disheveled hair. She twirled one auburn ringlet around her finger and examined her ends. *Split. Ick.* She definitely had to try and squeeze in a trim before the party. "We're not dysfunctional.

Just normal. I really don't know if I can, though. I have tons of work piled up on my desk, a deadline looming, and I'm starting to feel a little frazzled." *To say the least.*

"Oh, Kylie, take a break. Dinner with your loving family is just what the doctor ordered. A little wine, a nice rare roast beef. I'm even making your favorite," Carol sang.

"Not cream cheese garlic mashed potatoes?" Kylie squeaked for effect.

Her mother's rolling laughter told her it had worked. "Yes, my dear, those wonderful fattening potatoes. A chocolate bomb cake for dessert."

Kylie's stomach rumbled and she realized she hadn't eaten anything all day except half a grapefruit with her coffee. "Count me in! I have to hop in the shower and check my emails, though. What time were you thinking?"

"Is five good?"

Kylie glanced at the clock. That left her nearly three hours to do some prep work for the party and get some work done. "I'll be there. Can I bring anything?"

"Just your gorgeous self, sweetie. Love you."

As she put the groceries away, her brain kept trying to stray to what had happened in the grocery store. Had she really

been necking with her long lost flame in the pickle aisle? Had she really let him press against her wantonly and invade her space while anyone and everyone could see? Yes. She had. A delicious erotic thrill made her shiver. How slutty. How naughty. Something she would never have conceived she was capable of. The fact that it had opened a big empty space in the middle of her chest didn't deter from the brazen sensuality she suddenly felt.

It didn't change a thing, though. Not the feel of phantom hands on her skin. Not the total recall of how hard his erection had felt sliding over her engorged clit. Not the memory of how wonderful Wade's mouth had tasted crushed against hers. Invading her. Taking her in a kiss so deep she had felt her toes curl in her tennis shoes. It didn't change one damn thing. She couldn't let herself be with him. She would not give into the feelings that were threatening to suffocate her or force her to her knees. He had left her and she wouldn't degrade herself by wanting him again.

Eight years he had been gone. After pledging his undying love, planning a future with her, he'd up and left. Gone off without a word. Without a note.

His parents had had to break the news and help pick up the pieces. "He called us, Kylie. He says he's joined the Army. He wouldn't even tell us why. Just that he'd keep in touch and asked that we deliver a message to you," Terri Sinclair

had said. She had wiped her swollen eyes with a tissue and cleared her throat. Waiting. She let Kylie compose herself and bring her own tears under control. Her heart was breaking, it had been evident, but her concern for Kylie's wounded heart had been obvious.

Finally, Kylie had managed the question in a strangled voice. "What was the message, Terri?"

"That he's sorry and that no matter what you might think, he has always loved you. Always will." The other woman's voice had cracked on the final word. Her bloodshot eyes had met Kylie's. Searching for any sense that Kylie might know why he had gone. Kylie didn't have a clue. Her only thought was that it must have been to get away from what they had. That she was suffocating him. That all the dreams they'd shared and plotted well into the wee hours hadn't really been what he wanted. It had all been a lie.

But the words haunted her. *He had always loved her. Always would.*

Kylie slammed the pantry door so hard the kitchen window rattled. If he'd loved her so damn much, why had he up and left?

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Chapter 3

Kylie felt her mood lighten just a bit as she neared her parents' house. Maybe her mother was right. She simply needed a nice dinner with her family. Some good wine, great food, and her father's silly jokes should make her feel better. She felt extremely blessed to have come from such a tight-knit family. Even when they were ready to kill each other, the Walkers were as thick as thieves. She made a promise to herself that she wouldn't be too hard on Fawn. In fact, the biggest obstacle of the night wouldn't be forgiving her sister, it would be making sure Fawn didn't slip and mention the surprise party.

She turned into the driveway and nearly slammed into the navy blue sedan parked near the end.

"Mom must have invited someone else to dinner," she muttered. That wasn't like her mother. She usually preferred quiet, relaxed dinners. Just the four of them. Kylie grabbed her purse and checked her makeup in the rearview mirror. She didn't look too bad for someone running on four hours sleep and hardly any food. She fluffed her curls and checked her teeth for lipstick. Climbing from the car, she wrapped her coat around her tightly against the January wind.

The door opened before she was halfway up the steps. Fawn grinned at her and handed her a glass of red wine even as Kylie pulled the screen door open.

"Have a feeling you'll be needing this, sissy," Fawn said and stepped back to let her in.

When Kylie stepped into the living room, she nearly dropped her goblet. Staring at her from the archway into the dining room was Wade. She let out a nervous sigh as she felt her hands start to shake.

"Maybe I should take that back for a moment," Fawn whispered, taking the wineglass from her sister's hand. She rubbed Kylie's arm gently and leaned in and whispered in Kylie's ear, "You can do this. Consider it practice for the party. Just stay calm. I'll help you make a break for it if it's too much."

Kylie couldn't help but smile. Fawn sounded as if she was ready to help her escape from prison. "Thanks, Fawnie. I may take you up on it. Did you know he would be here?" she hissed. "If you did, Fawn, so help me—"

Fawn raised her hands in mock surrender, her long black hair swaying around her shoulders. "Hey, don't shoot the messenger. I had no idea. They showed up not ten minutes after me."

Wade stared at her from the dining room, his face caught

somewhere between concern, embarrassment, and humor. He raised one hand and waggled his fingers at her in greeting.

Kylie waved back and tried to smile; it felt more like a deathly grimace stretched across her face. She was grateful no parents were in the room to see her discomfort. Her mother would never intentionally set her up for embarrassment; she must have assumed that Kylie's heart had long since healed. The Sinclairs were her parents' closest friends. It would be perfectly natural for Carol to invite them to dinner along with their son. One big happy reunion.

"Give me the wine now." Kylie sighed and grabbed for the glass. "Have the bottle ready." Then she downed the wine in one gulp.

Fawn giggled like a little girl and grabbed the bottle from the coffee table. She held the bottle at the ready, wagging her eyebrows for effect. When all else failed, the Walker girls turned to humor. It was a trait they had shared since childhood. "Is Madame sufficiently soused or does she need more?"

Kylie wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and stuck the glass out. "Madame needs more. A lot more. In fact, just stick a straw in the bottle."

Fawn laughed again and refilled her glass. From the corner of her eye, Kylie could see Wade witnessing them employ their silly coping mechanism. She could feel his gaze boring into her skin, making her heat up, causing a flush to rise in her cheeks. Fuck it. Let him stare. He could stare all he wanted as long as he behaved. She'd been ambushed and embarrassed, that was enough for one night. If he thought he was going to paw all over her again like some horny teenager he had another think coming. She wasn't some convenient trollop he could bed as he breezed through town on his way to the next job. The next adventure.

Kylie took a prim sip of her second glass as the effects of the first quickly seeped into her tight muscles. Her head swam for an instant and she had to remind herself to breathe. "That might not have been such a good idea," she muttered to Fawn.

"Here, eat a hunk of cheese." Fawn shoved several dainty slices of cheese into her hand just as her mother came through the archway.

"Kylie! I didn't know you were here. Come on in, sweetheart. Aren't you going to take your coat off and stay awhile?" she said with a smile. Watching her mother's face, Kylie could see the unspoken question. *Are you okay, Kylie? I haven't made a mistake, have I?*

She shook her head and shed her coat. Kylie hugged her

mom and kissed her dad and greeted the Sinclairs. All the things a proper young lady should do. Under it all she felt a sickening pulse of unease. Wade stared at her openly. She remembered that look. It was a look of concern. Kylie attempted to keep her eyes on everyone, anyone, but him. The magnetic pull won, though. She let her eyes roam over him. His hair was freshly washed, hurriedly combed. He had shaved and there was a small red mark on his left cheekbone where he had nicked himself. Her eyes skittered over his wide, muscular shoulders swathed in a blue button-down shirt. A tiny vee of his smooth chest was visible above the two buttons he had left undone.

She tried to control it but her gaze fell to the gray dress slacks he wore. They did very little to conceal magnificently muscled thighs, lean hips, and an ass she could bounce a quarter off. And under the fly. Oh, under the fly was the stuff X-rated dreams were made of.

Kylie forced herself to look up. She found Wade staring at her, one eyebrow raised, a hesitant but sly grin on his face. Kylie felt herself blush because she had a feeling that even after all these years, he could still read her mind.

I think I'm going to be sick.

Stop it!

Don't pass out.

Stop it!

*Would it be wrong to climb him like a monkey in heat?
Oh, sweet Jesus, what is happening to me?*

Her mind raced as she took her seat. Kylie couldn't follow the conversation. The running monologue of worry and fear filled her head. She barely tasted the roast beef. Her favorite mashed potatoes tasted like sawdust. The only thing she could taste was the wine and she was meticulous about drinking it slowly. The last thing she needed was to throw up or pass out at the dinner table. As much as her mom loved her, she doubted she would appreciate that kind of family memory.

"Kylie?"

She followed the voice and found her father looking at her worriedly. "Sorry, Dad. What'd you say?"

"I said, are you okay? You've barely spoken tonight." Pat Walker's bright red hair was cut within a half inch of his scalp. His normally jovial face was drawn with concern.

Kylie forced a laugh. "I'm fine. I guess I just zoned out. I'm a little tired and I think I'm getting a headache. In fact," she rose and dropped her linen napkin onto the seat of her chair, "I think I'll go out for some fresh air. That usually helps the headaches pass."

"Want me to come with you?" Fawn chirped with fake cheer.

"No. I think I'll be fine alone. Just need to clear my head. Great dinner, Mom. Best mashed potatoes on earth." Then she beat a hasty retreat out the back door. She didn't manage a deep breath until she heard the wooden screen door slam. *Free!* She could think again and her main thought was that she had to leave. The question was, how did she leave and not hurt her parents' feelings?

* * * *

Wade watched Kylie take off for the second time that day. The sight of her back, held painfully straight, was becoming a familiar sight. He sighed, put down his own napkin, and stood.

"If y'all will excuse me, I have a feeling this is my fault. I think I might go out there and see what I can do about setting it right."

"I didn't think—" Carol Walker twisted her napkin viciously, her face pale. Her big blue eyes, almost identical to Kylie's, shone with unwanted tears. "I had no idea she would react like this. I feel so awful..."

Wade raised a hand and smiled. "Miss Carol, it has nothing to do with you and everything to do with me. Not only am I

back but we ... we ran into each other this morning. I think she was already upset when she arrived. Please don't blame yourself."

Carol nodded, looking unconvinced. Wade realized she was deep in the throes of motherly guilt. There wasn't a damn thing he could do to stop it. "I'll be back," he said quietly. He pulled on his jacket and tried to steady his nerves. If he was any kind of man at all, he'd go out there and tell her the truth. No matter how much it hurt her. No matter how much it hurt him.

* * * *

Kylie sank onto the double swing and let herself rock. She forced her muscles to relax, forced herself to breathe deep. She really had to get back into her yoga routine before she ended up twisted in knots. Closing her eyes, she listened to the night sounds, few and far between due to the chilly temperatures but there just under the surface. She heard a dog barking somewhere down the block and the whooshing of traffic on the main street.

Her heart skipped when she heard the wood screen door bang an alert. Someone was coming. She prayed it was Fawn or even her mother, but the way her stomach fluttered with nervousness, she knew it was Wade. He was still ensconced in darkness when he spoke.

"You okay? And before you answer, I just want you to know that I had no idea. I didn't think you and Fawn would be here. I would never have come and put you in that position. Not after ... not since I lost control this morning."

Kylie felt a bubble of laughter rise out of her throat. "Lost control? You mean groping me in the pickle aisle?" For some reason the whole ridiculous thing suddenly struck her as hysterical. Powerless to stop herself, she let the giggles take over.

Wade stepped forward and the soft glow of a distant streetlight revealed his serious face. "What's so funny? You're not having some kind of breakdown, are you?" He looked so sincere, so intent, it made Kylie laugh harder.

"You know, I believe I am. I think I may very well be ready for the booby hatch. Wanna call and book me a room?"

"Look," he whispered, leaning close to be heard. His big hands steadied the swing and forced her to stillness. Kylie felt her breath suddenly solidify in her lungs. He was so close. Close enough for her to smell the fruity scent of wine on his lips. "Can we please take a walk? Talk away from the house. I know this sounds paranoid, but I can almost feel them all in there. Faces pressed against the window, watching our every move. It's freaking me out."

"My mom knows I'm upset?"

"Christ, Kylie! She's your *mother*. She was wringing her hands when I left. She kept saying she should have told you. She just had no idea it would upset you. It's been so long." The last words were barely audible.

"It has been so long." She sighed. Kylie stood and pulled her coat tighter against the cold. Thank goodness she'd had the presence of mind to grab it before fleeing the house. "Let's walk down to the gazebo. Dad said he put new chairs out there. It'll be a good excuse as to why we wandered off."

"Thank you," he said a little too earnestly for Kylie's taste. She wanted to hate him or, at the very least, be angry with him. Wade took her hand in his. His hand was so large, so warm, so *male*. The heat felt good on her cold fingers but what felt better was the familiarity. She let herself enjoy the feel of those hands again. Hands that had traveled and explored every part of her body. There was no harm in enjoying it for just a *moment*.

"Let's go. I'm starting to lose the feeling in my face."

Wade followed her in the dark, still holding tight to her hand. Every so often his thumb would sweep a small circle across her palm and Kylie felt her insides heat up and start to soften. How very erotic it was. It was just fingers running over the palm of her hand but it inspired so many more sensual thoughts. It made her wonder what the gentle

caress of his fingers would feel like on other parts of her body. Other very eager parts. When she curled her fingers with unease, he released her hand willingly.

They came to the gazebo at the farthest reaches of her parents' property. "Look. He put the screens in," Kylie said, momentarily forgetting her warring emotions of terror and joy at being alone with Wade. She stepped inside and viewed her father's most recent handiwork. "Chaise lounges, fancy cushions. Bamboo blinds!" she said, lowering one elegant wheat-colored blind. "Wow. So this is what parents do when their nest is empty." She laughed and flopped onto a chaise. She was suddenly exhausted. Too physically and emotionally drained to be nervous anymore.

Wade settled on a wicker ottoman and eyed her. His body was full of tension. Taut muscled forearms resting on his knees, shoulders hunched. He looked tightly coiled. Ready to spring.

"You didn't bring me out here to kill me, did you?" Kylie said, trying to make light of the situation.

"No. I came out here to apologize." He rubbed his hands together and shivered. "Didn't expect it to be so damn cold. Most places I've been lately are a little warmer than Maryland."

"Let the blinds down," she said without thinking. *Stupid! Let the blinds down?* Then she'd be sequestered from the world with a man who made her body go insane even though he'd left her heart scattered in a million little pieces.

He nodded and rose to do what she'd suggested. Kylie's heart rate went up as each blind went down. After a moment, when all the blinds were lowered, it was completely dark. "Now I can't see you," he muttered.

Kylie felt around on the round table that sat between the matching chaises. "Eureka, there's a kerosene lantern here. What are my parents doing with their evenings?" She snickered. Another pat across the table and she found a long lighter. "You wouldn't happen to know how to light one of these things, would you? I don't think Dad would appreciate it if I blew up his newly renovated gazebo."

Somehow in the dark, Wade managed to light the lantern. In the gentle glow, his face was shadowed with worry. "Now on to that apology."

Kylie couldn't help it. The more uncomfortable she became the more she joked. "Think nothing of it. It's the most excitement I've had in years. Mr. Bernard will make sure everyone within a twenty-mile radius knows that I was the unadvertised special today. Everyone loves a tale about an easy girl."

"But you're not," he said and took her hand again. Whether it was the blinds warding off the chill, the meager heat from the lantern, or just being this damn close to Wade, Kylie felt overheated. "You never have been. I'm so damn sorry I came back and then just ... did that! Like I could stake my claim again. I've always had a hard time keeping my hands off you, Miss Kylie, and I guess some things never change."

It still rattled Kylie when he called her that. Just hearing it again made her want to laugh and cry at the same time. She tried to pull her hand free, not sure she could handle his sincerity and his touch at the same time. One or the other maybe, but not both. This time, though, Wade held tight.

"It was wrong. Don't misunderstand," he said before a self-deprecating laugh, "it's exactly what I wanted to do at the time. That and so much more. But I shouldn't have."

"More?" Kylie wheezed. Her heart was beating painfully hard and she felt her willing sex pick up the tempo.

A warmth seeped between her thighs and she knew if she were to press her hands to her slacks, she would be wet. Her breasts ached with an overwhelming need to feel his hand settle on them and her nipples were brutally hard. She was a mess.

"More. Always more. With you? Nothing was ever enough.

Seeing you just brings that all up again. It was like being eighteen, nineteen, twenty again. Madly in love and wanting nothing to do but run my hands all over you. Followed by my mouth." Wade leaned in so their faces were only an inch apart. "Followed by other things. A certain painfully hard thing that would probably not last a second if you were to wrap that delicate hand around it."

Kylie felt her chest shudder with the effort to pull in air. She could barely hear him over the hiss of rushing blood in her ears. The hair at the nape of her neck rose, triggering a tingling along her scalp. The only thing that she could focus on was his beautiful face so close to hers. His full lips just waiting to be kissed. Despite her anger, she was losing the battle. She wanted to kiss him. To touch him. And if she was honest, she knew she wanted so much more. She wanted to feel his length sliding into her soft humidity. Wanted to come while watching his face as he did the same. Kylie swallowed hard to ward off the mental images and her dry throat clicked.

"More?" she repeated stupidly.

Wade's lips were nearly touching hers but he held firm, keeping a tiny sliver of air between them. "May I? I don't want to come on like a caveman this time."

"Caveman?" *Jesus H. Christ! Have you become a mockingbird?* Instead of risking another stupid comment

Kylie simply nodded.

Then his lips were on hers. Gentle at first. A feather-light stroke of his lips across hers. Without thinking she parted her lips inviting him to take her more deeply. Wade obliged, sweeping his tongue across hers. His hands cradled her face and he stroked her jaw with his fingers. He slid his hands along the curve of her neck, his long fingers working lazy circles at her nape as his mouth pressed harder and his tongue stroked deeper.

Her nipples hardened even further, turning the most subtle shift of her silk blouse into an amazing sensual experience. Kylie surrendered. She was so damn angry at herself for her weakness but the price of not having what she wanted was too high. She could have walked away from any other man. Continued to deny herself. But not Wade. Never Wade.

Kylie arched up against him and rolled her tongue over his. Relishing the gentle pull of his mouth against hers. Wade broke the kiss, nuzzling along her jaw and raking his hot tongue over the fragile flesh of her neck. Kylie heard a whimper and realized that she had made the sound. He placed soft kisses along her collarbone, pausing to dip his tongue into each tiny hollow.

"Oh damn, Kylie, you taste so good," he said, his voice coarse. A sound of pure desire issued from his throat as he

pushed the lapels of her coat aside. His fingers found the first button of her blouse and then he paused, fingers at the ready.

She couldn't see him clearly in the meager light but she knew that his face would hold a questioning look. Kylie didn't trust herself to speak so she simply reached up and undid the button herself. Wade sighed and made quick work of the rest. The blouse fell open and cold air rushed over her skin. Goose bumps sprang up instantly and then Wade smoothed his hands over her breasts. With his thumbs, he strummed one nipple, then the other. Her pussy grew wetter, her thighs trembled beneath her thin slacks. Now that she had given in to what she wanted, she couldn't stand the wait. Each second felt like a year.

His breath touched her first. Like summer sun on her skin. Kylie arched up, blindly seeking his wet, hot mouth. Wade didn't make her wait long. He captured one puckered nipple between his lips and tweaked it gently. Sucking it completely into his mouth, he rolled his tongue over the firm peak until she thought she would die. He cupped her mound through her slacks, just the slightest hint of pressure in his caress. A subtle pressure riding the cleft of her labia. Kylie wondered if she could come just by feeling his hand on her. The fabric of the slacks felt as thick as burlap. Anything separating her from the stroke of his fingers seemed an impossible barrier.

"Please, Wade," she whispered. She hated herself for saying it but was somewhat proud of her boldness. She was risking here. More than him. She was risking opening old wounds and at the same time claiming what she wanted. Being honest with herself. She wanted him, wanted his hands on her. She was a big girl and like a big girl she could have sex with Wade without expecting a happily-ever-after ending. It could just be about the here and now. She wouldn't even let herself think about the future. "I don't think I can wait—"

"Shhhh," he said against her breast and she trembled. The vibration of his utterance sent warm pulses through her. Each brush of his tongue traveled an invisible line linking nipple to pubis. An electrical current of pleasure that had her sex clenching in a needy rhythm. A drumbeat of desire in her very core.

"I need you in me," she demanded a little more boldly. She had already put her neck on the chopping block, what was one more declaration?

"Not this time. This time it's all about you, Kylie," he murmured, kissing a lazy path down between her breasts. He parted her blouse as he went lower. His tongue made moist trails over her flat belly, around to the sides of her waist where it was so sensitive she was helpless not to jerk and giggle like a child.

Wade undid her slacks and she lifted her hips to help him along. He slid them over her hips and to her knees and her panties quickly followed. His lips never left her, barely there kisses coming to rest on her flanks, her hipbones, the most delicate skin of her lower belly. His fingers curled in the neatly trimmed hair on her mound, and their closeness to her weeping sheath made her cry out just a little. *Damn him!* He was driving her insane.

Wade chuckled in the dark as he placed tiny kisses along her inner thighs. He flicked his tongue over the soft skin in a serpentine rhythm. He was so close to her clit she could feel each exhale warm the tiny organ. Kylie fought the urge to box his ears or rap him on the head. She would have to suffer the foreplay. It wouldn't be so bad if it hadn't been so damn long.

Then he caught her off-guard, sweeping that delicious tongue over her swollen clit. Kylie went rigid, sucking in a hiss of air between her teeth. She nearly came that moment but held it off. She would not, would not, would not! He circled her clit wickedly, his mouth on her like suede-soft heaven. He drove his tongue into her cunt, arching it there, probing the quivering ring of her entrance. Kylie's hips bucked and she grabbed his shoulders with shaking hands. Anything. She would do anything to come. To feel his hard cock slide the length of her, not stopping until he'd buried himself as deeply as possible.

Wade traced the lips of her labia, suckling each one until Kylie moaned. Each time she moaned he moved on to deliver sweet torture to another part of her. He slid one finger into her, teasing her G-spot. Wade was the only lover who had ever successfully located it. He returned to it by memory as if a map of her pleasure was imbedded in his mind.

Her grip tightened on his shoulders as he sucked her clit into his mouth, pulsing gently with his tongue until tiny sparks of purple and pink danced behind her closed eyelids. He slid another broad finger deep inside her and started to thrust. His rhythm drove her higher. Suckle, lick, thrust, hook. Each time he hooked his fingers a spasm of pleasure coursed through her and her slick, needy flesh clamped around his fingers. Each stroke on her G-spot inspired a new clench in her sex.

Kylie panted, hovering on the edge, and Wade stopped. He knew she was there and he was going to torture her.

She lay still, refusing to beg. The low, flickering light assaulted her eyes making her feel unbalanced. His fingers were still buried in her channel, his lips a fraction of an inch away from her clit. Kylie waited. Her heart thumping so hard she was sure he would hear it in the near dark. She could almost imagine an ornery smile spreading like a stain over his handsome face. She sucked in a deep quavering breath and sighed.

"Sweet, Miss Kylie. I missed you," he whispered and then his lips wrapped around her, his tongue darting and swirling and arching so quickly she barely registered one point of pleasure before the next one was triggered. He drove a third finger into her, knowing she could accommodate it, and pushed into her harder and deeper than before.

Kylie vaguely heard the screen door bang in the distance as the first hot rush of orgasm washed over her. She bucked beneath Wade and he steadied her hips with his free hand as his fingers continued to delve into her, a sweet invasion. One wave followed another, each echo of climax shaking her to the bone. Kylie shoved her fist in her mouth just as a triumphant, delighted cry rose from her throat. Wade never stopped, his fingers and tongue teasing every drop of pleasure from her body.

Then her mind remembered the sound of the screen door and though her body still shook, she sat up. "Wade!" she hissed. "I think someone's coming."

Reluctantly, he withdrew from her, helped her slide her slacks over her hips. He wiped her juices from his face with his shirt sleeve and smiled at her in the near dim light.

Kylie's blouse was still unbuttoned when Fawn called out in the dark. "Where are you guys?"

The gazebo door swung open and Kylie pulled her coat

closed just as Fawn's face appeared. "What's going on? Are you okay? Why are you in the here?" Fawn fired one question after another.

Kylie opened her mouth to speak when Wade answered. "Just looking for a little privacy. It's hard to deliver an apology under the scrutiny of well-meaning family."

Fawn studied them both suspiciously. She scanned Wade head to toe and then grinned. "It sure is hard."

A bark of laughter escaped Kylie and she quickly covered her mouth. She tried to camouflage it with a cough but her sister knew her too well.

"Well, when you're all ... *presentable* again, come on in the house. Mom's having a conniption because she thinks you've run off into the night. Distraught. Shaken. I won't tell her the truth. You can thank me later." Fawn giggled.

Kylie started to follow but Wade grabbed her by the arm. "Wait!"

"We really should get back." She sighed. She had an obligation to her family. Especially if they were worried about her.

"Just one second," he said and turned her so they were facing each other. He smoothed the hair back along her brow and then cradled her face in his hand. He stroked

along her jaw with his thumbs as he lowered his head for an almost chaste kiss. "Thank you."

"Shouldn't I be thanking you?" Kylie laughed.

"No. Really. Thank you for letting me be close to you. It's all I could think about from the moment I crossed the state line. You've never left my system, Miss Kylie. You're my drug of choice. There are some things I need—"

A sudden and bright anger flared in Kylie and she fought the urge to slap him. "Well, if that's the truth, Wade Sinclair, you did a hell of a job of detoxing yourself. I'd say eight years is a pretty damn long time to stay away from your drug of choice. I think I'd say that you were cured long ago."

Kylie walked back to the house without him. Let him mope. She'd moped for a very long time when he had walked away from her. Tonight had been about her accepting what she wanted from him. Taking what she needed. She didn't need to know about his feelings. His feelings didn't matter.

* * * *

Wade watched her go with a sigh of frustration. He should have told her the truth the moment he'd gotten her alone. But the fear had won as it always did. It was so much easier to lose himself in her. Try to escape and forget the fact that he owed her an explanation. He knew this in the part of his heart that honored what he and Kylie had once had. What

he wished with an aching heart that they could have now. He also knew that truth was stranger than fiction and he didn't think he could take the look of disappointment on her face. The look he was positive would be there if he were to come clean.

He had spent so much time looking at the world from behind a camera to avoid looking at his own life and what he had lost. It had become so much easier to express himself with pictures. To show the world what was going on inside of him with a digital photo or a matted print.

He wished he could take a picture for Kylie. A picture that would show her just how much she meant to him. Just how much of his heart and soul she took up. He had to tell her the truth soon. No matter what. Even if the fear felt almost overwhelming when he even thought about it.

"But hearing the ridiculous truth would probably be a damn sight better than what she thinks now," he muttered. There was no doubt that Kylie thought he had simply not wanted her. That all of the plans he had made with her, lying in bed with their naked limbs tangled together, had all been a farce. Something to keep her on a leash until he was ready to split. He didn't want her thinking that. Not ever. Those years with Kylie had been the best years of his life.

And he couldn't forget them. They haunted him whether awake or asleep. They served as an unattainable

measuring stick for everything in his life. Women, jobs, happiness. He hadn't truly been happy since the moment he got on that bus and pulled away from Parkville. From Kylie.

Wade raised all the blinds and extinguished the lantern. He smoothed the chaise cushions and checked his clothes. No use in embarrassing both of them by returning to the house all disheveled and looking guilty.

With his head down and his feet feeling like cement blocks, he headed back toward the house. His body still hummed from being with Kylie and he could still taste her on his lips. He could smell her lingering scent. For just a moment he let himself relive the feel of her skin under his hands, the slope of her breast, the satiny skin of her inner thigh. It had taken all of his control not to take her right there in the gazebo. Give in to his incessant urge to bury his cock in the slick, creamy flesh between her thighs. Feel her urgent clenches around his length.

He drew in a stuttering breath and closed his eyes, his hand on the screen door. He had to accept the fact that the time had come.

When she was past her anger enough to hear him out, he would tell her the truth. And face the consequences.

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Chapter 4

Kylie ignored her phone. Since leaving Wade open-mouthed on the gazebo the night before, she hadn't wanted to risk it being him. She'd slipped out of her parents' house with a polite apology. She just wasn't feeling well. She would see everyone at her housewarming party. Since then she'd let her phone go to voicemail and always checked her cell phone's caller ID. She didn't want to talk to him anyway. There was nothing to say. He'd run out ages ago and then come back into town and went after a little slap and tickle.

Kylie wasn't ashamed of giving in to her desire to be with him. She just didn't hold any expectations. She refused to delude herself. She was the same woman he'd walked away from eight years ago. The only difference was she had now wasted eight years of her life not getting over him. She slammed a box of frozen puff pastries on the counter and sighed.

"Getting over him is exactly what I have to do." She needed to get a cat. At least if she had a pet, she wouldn't sound so insane when she spoke out loud to herself.

When the flashing red indicator on her phone told her she had a message, she dialed into voicemail.

"What is up with you not answering your friggin' phone?" Fawn's voice screeched. "The party's tomorrow for fuck's sake! Does this have something to do with your alone time with Wade out on Dad's gazebo? You know, you never did tell me what went on between you two out there." Fawn sighed dramatically and then chirped, "Anyway, call me. You emailed me this list of *missing items* and I have a few questions. Don't worry! I'm not going to try to get out of the errand. I'll stop and get it all after work. I'm just not sure what you want. Call me. I'm at the office. Call me, dammit!"

Kylie shook her head and fought the urge to curl up on the sofa and find a mindlessly bad movie on cable. The party was tomorrow and her sister had her tearing her hair out. She punched in Fawn's number.

"What questions?" she growled when her sister answered.

"Like what kind of plates, napkins, and plastic ware?"

Kylie rubbed her temples and tried not to bark out her answer. "The kind you use to eat."

"Noooo, Miss Smarty Pants. Do you want anniversary themed ones or just run-of-the-mill backyard barbeque stuff?"

"Use your own judgment," Kylie snapped.

"I would but then you'd end up telling me I should have

gotten the other kind."

"Trust me, Fawn, I won't do that. I'll be too busy sucking down booze and being relieved that this whole surprise fiasco is over."

"Okay. But I need you to promise. Sorry, but we've been sisters too long. I know you. You are so a perfectionist."

"I'll just be happy to actually surprise them and pull this off. All thoughts and hopes of perfection went down the toilet weeks ago. *I promise.*"

"All right. I'm flying solo then. *My judgment.* No complaints."

"None." Kylie laughed. Fawn did have a point. Kylie knew she leaned toward picky.

"So, spill. What did happen out there? You've been in a snit ever since. Impossible to get a hold of. Like a hermit!"

"Nothing happened," Kylie lied through her tightly clenched teeth. This was the last thing she wanted to discuss with Fawn.

"Liar!" Fawn shouted and Kylie jerked the phone away from her ear with a yelp. "You were all flushed. He was all flushed and ... engorged. I'm not an idiot, dear sister. There was definitely some hanky and most likely some panky going on out there. You think you're so smart, pulling your coat closed

when I came in. Did you really think I wouldn't notice that your blouse was unbuttoned? Spill!"

"Okay! Okay! Jeez," Kylie cried. "Not that it's any of your business, but we messed around a little."

"Ooooh. A reconciliation? You two are so pathetic. Giving each other cow eyes and making like you don't know that you're still madly in love even after all these years. It could be romantic if the two of you would pull your heads out of your asses."

"Fawn!"

"I'm just saying. 'Fess up to yourselves, then each other, and then we can finally get on with the flippin' happily ever after crap."

"There will be no happily ever after," Kylie said. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a billion things to do."

"Well, if you won't listen to reason, Ky, just remember one thing."

"What's that?" Kylie snapped.

"You are not a slut. You do not do things like *mess around* on your parents' property. Hell! You're practically a nun when it comes to stuff like that. So ask yourself this: why did you do it?" Fawn hung up.

Kylie slammed the phone into its charger so hard it slid to the side. *Why did Fawn have to do this today?* Kylie already felt like she was going to have a heart attack, why was her sister making things worse? Fawn always had been one to poke the bear. Fawn was infuriating. She was nosy, opinionated, and self-centered. But Kylie couldn't escape the thought that there was one thing her sister was not. A liar.

* * * *

"Heeeeeeeee?"

"I'm coming!" Kylie checked her watch. Two o'clock on the nose. For once in her life, Fawn was on time. Unreal.

She put the last lily in the centerpiece and stepped back. Nice work, if she did say so herself. Her mother's favorites all included. Lilies, irises, carnations, and tea roses. Kylie had been surprised to discover that lilies smelled awful. Hopefully the sweet scent of the tea roses would cover it.

She came into the living room where Fawn struggled with six or more shopping bags. "'I'm coming' usually means I'm coming to help you." She grunted, lowering the bags as gently as possible.

"That's everything?" Kylie asked.

"Hello to you too, Kylie. Nice to see you. You're welcome for lugging all your forgotten items into the house." Fawn took off her taupe cashmere wrap and draped it over a chair.

"Uh-uh." Kylie waved a finger. "Coat closet."

Fawn blew out a sigh and trudged into the dining room to stow her wrap. "Tucker should be here in about an hour with the kegs. The wine is in my car," she called.

"An hour! That's cutting it close, isn't it?" Kylie dug through the bags. Red peppers, tea lights, plasticware. So far everything was accounted for.

"Relax," Fawn said, grabbing a few bags and heading toward the dining room. "Mom and Dad are never on time. They're at least a half-hour late. *Always.*"

True.

"Okay. Let's get the utensils wrapped and all that stuff." Kylie dove in to the chore. Trying desperately to distract herself from the knowledge that in less than two hours Wade would be walking through the front door. He would be in her home. Close to her again. And now they had the embarrassing encounter from the other night. Another emotional elephant they had to pretend didn't exist.

"You're thinking about him," Fawn whispered, wrapping forks and spoons and knives in napkins.

"Am not."

"Oh, yes you are. You always get that look when you're thinking about him."

"What look?" Kylie asked, narrowing her eyes. "There is no look."

"Yeah, there is. You get this look, like a deer caught in headlights. All wide open eyes, spacey, dreamy. Lips parted like some porn queen!"

"Stop!" Kylie shouted and slammed down the last of her bundles. She took a deep, shaky breath. *Don't play her game. Right.* "Where are the plates?"

"That bag, I think," Fawn said, pointing.

"Fawn, they're pur—"

"Yes, they're purple," Fawn giggled, "and don't you say another word. You promised. Remember? Come on, Kylie, this party is costing us an arm and a leg. Another thirty dollars worth of paper plates was not something my malnourished wallet could handle. I got them on clearance. A buck a pack."

Kylie pressed her lips together tightly and started stripping the cellophane from the packs. Not a word. She had

promised. Fawn was right. This party was costing a fortune. It was completely worth it but even her budget was feeling the strain.

"Just ask him," Fawn said softly. Sounding so unlike her nosy, bossy self.

"Ask him what?" Kylie sighed but she already knew the answer. Her sister meant ask him why. Her stomach jolted with an electric wave of anxiety at the thought.

"Ask him what happened. Why he left. Make peace with it. Then you two can get on with things. It's what you want," Fawn said as if stating fact.

"I can't." Her hands stroked the flowers, separated the paper plates, and tidied the napkin bundles. Anything to stay busy.

"And why not?"

"Because I already know the answer. He didn't want to be with me. Why add insult to injury?" Kylie mumbled. She straightened the candlesticks and smoothed the linen tablecloth.

"Because that's a load of horseshit and you know it. Something else happened and you're too chicken to find out what. Just ask him. I'll tell you what," Fawn said, hands on hips. "You ask him or I will."

"You wouldn't."

"Watch me," Fawn hissed as the doorbell rang. "There's Tucker! I'll go show him where to hook up the kegs." And then she scampered off.

Kylie watched her go, her heart heavy, her stomach knitted into an intricate nest of knots. *Fawn wouldn't pull such a childish move, would she?* Kylie put the finishing touches on the table with numb fingers. *Damn right she would.* If she wanted this whole thing to be handled correctly, she would have to beat her sister to the punch. She would have to ask Wade the big question. No matter how much she feared the answer.

* * * *

He looked incredible. No surprise there. Kylie thanked God for peripheral vision as she scanned Wade. Black dress slacks that showed off his narrow waist and hips, accentuated his leanly muscled upper body. A charcoal gray shirt that probably cost as much as her house hugged his sculpted shoulders, showing off his broad chest. His hair was freshly washed and combed back in mocha colored waves. Cleanly shaven. Nice leather loafers. He even smelled good. She could smell him across the room. A spicy, warm scent that made her think of evenings by the fire, and fall leaves.

She closed her eyes to block him out. She had to stay focused, her folks would be here any moment.

Kylie had made her decision. She would wait until the party was well underway and they wouldn't be missed. Then she would ask Wade if she could speak to him in private. Maybe once they were alone, she could find the nerve to ask him why he'd left. What she had done. Why he felt he had to run away.

* * * *

She looked spectacular. Wade tried to chat with people he had known all his life but his eyes and his mind kept straying back to Kylie. He did the funny thing, the polite thing, the charming thing. He held his beer in a death grip as he surreptitiously checked Kylie out. The jade-colored peasant blouse she wore made her blue eyes shine. Her snug dark jeans showed the gentle swell of her hips and sat just below her small waist. When she reached up to light the candles on the wall sconces, he caught a flash of the belly ring she wore. The sight of that tiny jewel made his heart stutter in his chest and did strange things beneath his slacks. The jeweled flats she wore reminded him of a fairy tale princess. She looked perfect, down to the silver jeweled clip that held her hair up in a terribly sexy, loose knot.

He took a desperate swallow of beer hoping it would stoke

his courage. At some point he had to get her alone and attempt to explain. To finally set to rest the idea he knew she had that he had left because he didn't love her. He had to set the record straight, not just for her, but for himself. Even if it meant a life without Kylie, it was the right thing to do. Wade was determined to do the right thing this time.

* * * *

"Okay, they're at the door," Kylie whispered to the group gathered in her living room. She kept her eye to the peephole and watched the frustration bloom on her mother's face. Her father still pattered at the car, grabbing the dishes her mom had offered to bring. Her parents never came to the door together at a party. Knowing this for a fact, Kylie had locked the door as their car had pulled up.

The doorbell sounded again and she could see Carol say something to Pat as he filled his arms with food. Another bong of the bell.

"Now she's getting mad," Kylie whispered and she heard laughter skitter through the room.

Finally, her father stood next to her mother and he knocked briskly on the door. Kylie turned the lock and stepped back with the crowd. "Come on in! It's open!"

The door flew open and Kylie felt a joyous warmth spread through her body as the assembled family and friends

shouted, "Surprise!"

And then her mother was crying, her father was shaking hands and the crowd was jostling forward to greet the couple. Kylie fell back against someone and turned. "I'm so sorry. Suddenly the room is—"

Wade steadied her with a hand, his eyes shining with humor and something else. Something just below the surface. The same look from the other night on the gazebo. "Too small," Kylie finished on a breath.

"Everyone's excited," he said with a smile. Wade brushed an errant lock of hair from her face and gently traced her lower lip with his thumb. "I bet you're just relieved."

Kylie's voice stuck in her throat at the feel of his skin against her mouth. The simple gesture sparked erotic images from their last meeting. His eyes gazing at her from between her parted thighs. The feel of his mouth on her...

"I have to go say hi," she managed.

"Of course you do." He took a swig of beer and licked foam from his upper lip. The sight of his tongue touched off a tiny shiver through Kylie's entire body.

"I need to talk to you, though, later if that's okay."

"I was about to say the same thing," Wade said, suddenly

looking unsure. Not his usual demeanor.

"Good. I'll come get you once we get the food set out and everyone's munching and mingling. I only need a minute of your time."

Wade nodded and just smiled. Kylie went to greet her parents.

"You did all this for us," Carol Walker whispered in her daughter's ear. "No wonder you've been run down. It's gorgeous." She sighed. "The table is spectacular and I'd bet my last dollar you made that beautiful cake."

Kylie felt herself blush. "Fawn helped," she offered.

"She had the idea?" her mother teased.

"No, really. She pulled through when I put my foot down. We did it together."

Carol leaned in closer and gave her daughter a serious stare. "I see Wade is here. Are you okay with that? I know you'd never turn down the Sinclairs. They must have asked if he could come."

"They did. I am. And just enjoy your party. Don't worry about stuff like that. We're okay. I mean it," she added at her mother's skeptical look. "Mingle!" Kylie laughed, shooing her. "Some of these people drove hours to celebrate your

thirty years."

Fawn helped Kylie put the food out. Food covered the dining room table, the kitchen table, and the island in the middle of Kylie's country kitchen. Fawn made her plate and they stepped back to eye the party. "Looks good to me. I'd say a smashing success!" Fawn bit into a canapé and sighed. "Let me guess, you made these little bites of heaven on earth?" she said, rolling her eyes with exaggerated pleasure.

"Guilty as charged. I'm glad you like them." Kylie scanned the room for Wade, finally spotting him in the sunroom addition of the house. He was talking to Mr. Perry, her father's former boss. Standing there by her fire, he looked like a dream come true. A man she could envision being a part of every day from here on out. He was supposed to come along with this dream house of hers. And after that would come babies, the way they had always wanted. She was sad to know that couldn't happen. That she couldn't have what her parents had. At least not with Wade.

"I was about to ask why you weren't scarfing down this food, but I have my answer. You finally gonna act like a grownup and talk to him?"

Kylie took a healthy gulp of her Merlot and set her glass down. "Right now. If I don't do it now, I may never work up the nerve again." She started through the crowd to get

Wade.

"Go on, Kylie! Get down with your bad self!" Fawn called, her words dying on a giggle.

Kylie wanted to ask her what was so damn funny.

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Chapter 5

"Good Lord, don't look at the clutter," Kylie said, glancing around her bedroom. *What a bloody mess.* "It's the only room I didn't get to, so I just shut the door." Her laptop and notes for interviews and articles were strewn across the floor by her bentwood rocker. Her bed was unmade. Several outfits that she had decided against were scattered over the bed and the floor.

"Don't worry about it," he said, eyeing the rocker that held a basket of clean laundry. "Can I sit on the bed? It seems to be—"

"The only clear surface." Kylie giggled, her nerves helping her find humor in the situation. The most important few minutes of her life taking place in a horribly messy bedroom. *Howembarrassing!*

She sank down onto the bed and clutched a pillow to her abdomen. She felt sick, light-headed, and stupid all at the same time. Not a good mixture of emotions. It only got worse when Wade gently placed his hand on her thigh. A few new emotions jumped into the fray. Desire, arousal, a flood of heat between her thighs.

"Wade, I can't..." She stopped, not sure what to say. She

tried to move his hand but he held it firm.

"I'm not trying to have an instant replay of the other night. I just need to touch you as I do this."

"Do what?"

"Come clean."

"So I don't have to ask? That's why I brought you up here. So I could face my demons."

"Demons," he muttered.

"What?"

"It kills me that anything to do with me could be considered demons to you. But I guess I deserved that. I fucked up royally, Kylie."

A new emotion joined in and Kylie felt her heart jump at the flood of feeling. How could she feel sympathy for him? She should be beating him over the head with her laptop. "Why don't you just tell me what happened and then we both can get on with our lives." She covered his hand with hers and noticed it was shaking.

Wade stood, blew out a sigh, and ran his hand through his hair. "Do you remember Jolene Watkins?"

Wade felt his heart trip hammer and the beer in his stomach rolled in a sickening wave. *Just do it. Get it over with. She deserves the truth!* He knew Kylie deserved the truth, but the thought of it putting an end, once and for all, to any chance of them being together made it nearly impossible to get the words out.

"Your ex-girlfriend?" Kylie asked, confusion on her face.

"Yes. And do you remember when you and I broke up about three months before I left?"

"Of course I remember. It was a ridiculous fight and we were only apart for a few weeks. What—" She met his eyes and her shoulders slumped, her head bowed. "Oh." She sighed. "Oh, Wade, why didn't you ever tell me? If you two —"

"I know what you're thinking," he said, kneeling in front of her. The look of pain on her face made it hard to breathe. Each breath was torture. "And you're right. But there's more. It's worse," he said before he let out a harsh bark of laughter, "if that's possible."

"Go on," Kylie's voice was almost inaudible and her eyes sparkled with unshed tears. One escaped and Wade thumbed it away.

"Just let me get it all out, okay? Then you can ... whatever you want. Throw me out, hit me, kill me." He laughed.

Her eyes met his and she nodded.

"When we were apart, I lost my mind. Cliché but true. I didn't care about anything. Not school, not football, nothing. My grades dropped in those few weeks and every college professor I had approached me and asked if everything was alright. They weren't the only ones to approach me."

"Jolene?"

"Yes. She'd been saying things off and on. Trying to remind me of all the fun we'd had together in high school before you and I started dating. Of course, I always turned her down flat. I was happy with you, Kylie," he said, taking her hands and squeezing them, "happier than I thought possible. When we broke up I ... gave up. Jolene smelled weakness and came in for the kill. It was my fault too, of course. I should have said no. I knew I wanted us back together more than anything."

"So what happened?" He watched her bite her lip to stop the words.

"We spent about a week together." Wade forced himself to look her in the eye. "Together ... in all respects." When Kylie bowed her head he thought his heart would break. The tears that had only been threatening now starting to fall.

"Kylie?" Goddamn, he knew this would be hard, but he had no idea how hard.

"We could have gotten past that, Wade." Her body shook slightly as she cried and Wade smoothed her shoulders, rubbed her back. He would give anything to make her feel better. To turn back time and not screw things up so thoroughly.

"Let me just get this out," he said. Standing, he paced. It was the only thing that calmed his nerves. He eyed Kylie. Most of her hair had spilled from her clip and she shielded her face behind the auburn fall. "Right after you and I got back together, I was happy again. On cloud nine. My grades started to go back up, my football game improved. I was *at peace*. I was right where I knew I should be. Back with you and back on track for the life we had planned together. I was still struggling with whether or not to tell you about Jolene. I wanted to make sure I was doing it for you and not for myself."

"For yourself?" Kylie snapped, the first hint of anger seeping into her voice. Wade was saddened by the sound. At one point, the only thing he had inspired in Kylie was happiness and laughter.

"I wanted to make sure I wasn't confessing to ease my own guilt. I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to risk losing you again but the guilt was killing me. I know it sounds like

bullshit, Ky, but I was a kid. It's no excuse, but when you're twenty, it's rare that you know what's right and what's wrong when it comes to mistakes that colossal. Hell, sometimes I don't feel like I can figure it out now let alone at that age."

"I still don't understand why you had to run off," she said. "Why not just not tell me and go on with your life? With me."

"About a week before I decided to go, Jolene called and said she was late."

He watched the confusion on her face quickly bleed into a sickening understanding. "She was pregnant?"

"So she said. She was pregnant, I was the father. What was I going to do about it?" The need to touch her became overwhelming. Wade sank down and settled his hands on her hips. If she pushed him away, so be it. He had to at least try. Somehow, touching Kylie grounded him, helped him to think clearly. She didn't push him away, or even try to move, she simply pinned him with her gaze. There was so much in that gaze that made him feel ashamed and small. But also, so much in her eyes that gave him just the barest hint of hope. And that was all he asked. The smallest glimmer of possibility.

"I didn't see a way out. She said she was keeping the baby. Tried to get me to marry her ... but I couldn't. I told her I'd take responsibility for my child but I wouldn't get married. I

couldn't marry a woman I didn't love. I'd never dreamed of marrying anyone but you, Kylie." Wade hung his head, trying to think of how to finish. "I couldn't confess to you. I felt like I would lose you one way or another, but I couldn't stand the thought of you knowing what I'd done. Hating me for it. Of course, you ended up hating me anyway." Wade felt a heavy weight of panic settle in his chest when she didn't either confirm or deny his statement.

"And the baby?"

"Well, I decided to go off and join the Army. I don't know why. Maybe I thought they could whip my sorry ass into shape. Maybe it was penance for ruining our future. Right before I left town, I went to the hospital and gave a sample for a paternity test when the baby was born. I sent her money to help with medical expenses and all that, but I told Jolene that I wanted confirmation that the baby was mine when it came along."

"And?" Kylie choked out the words and brushed her hair back. The pain in her eyes sent a slow wave of nausea through him.

"Excuses after excuses. Nine months passed. Then a year. Then almost a year and a half. First it was the baby was born the tests were pending. Then it was the baby was sick and the test got screwed up. Inconclusive. She needed money for the baby, hadn't I gotten the pictures? We could

retest when I came back to town. She knew I couldn't just come back at the drop of a hat. I was stationed in California. Finally, I got desperate. I sent her a letter threatening to get a lawyer and sue for custody if it was proven the baby was mine." Wade let his head fall and rest against Kylie's lap. Presumptuous of him and it would have been perfectly understandable if she kicked him in the head. He didn't care. He craved the feel of her. Angry or not.

"And?" Kylie prompted. Her voice was equal parts anger and sadness.

"She called me one night, drunk, and 'fessed up. There was no baby. She'd done the whole thing to try to win me back and then I'd up and left. Stepped up to the bat financially, but left town."

"She kept you going for the money."

Wade nodded slowly. His head pounded and felt stuffed full of cotton. "She said she had a drug problem. All the money I sent basically went up her nose or in her veins. To make the rest of the story short, I told her that the money train had ended. And then I hung up and tried to forget she had ever existed."

"And why didn't you ask your parents? Why not ask them? About the baby? They could have told you it was all a lie. It's

a pretty small town, Wade." Kylie looked as if she wanted to scream but it just wouldn't come.

"I didn't want my parents to know. It's part of why I left. They had such high hopes for us. That we would have what they have. What your folks have. So did I." He raked his hands through his hair and winced. Kylie just watched him. "I figured if they didn't mention it, Jolene hadn't told them. I was grateful for that. Once I knew the truth, obviously, I wished like hell I had asked."

"So once you knew," Kylie sighed, "why didn't you call? Tell me?"

Wade shut his eyes tightly and took another deep breath. It still felt like he was sucking oxygen through a swizzle stick. "Every time I talked to my mom, she'd tell me how wonderful you were doing. How you had bounced back. How successful you were ... and happy."

Kylie frowned, obviously recalling a much different scenario.

"She was so angry with me, Kylie. I wouldn't tell my parents what had happened. I had just up and run off on you. I especially couldn't tell her after I knew. Because then it was clear that my being a coward was based on a lie. A lie that cost me everything. I think my mother was just trying to protect you. Sadly enough," he whispered, "from me. I

made a decision *not* to tell you. Jolene had stolen nearly two years of my life. But I figured if you were okay without me, you deserved the life you were building. Not some man who would run off on you when things got sticky. I threw myself into my work, signed up to learn photography, started a life when my time in the Army ended. That's why I'm so successful. I did nothing but work. I worked and worked and worked until I was exhausted—looking at everything through a lens instead of at my own life. Trying to get perfect shots instead of mending mistakes. Most of all, trying to get you out of my head. Trying to forget what I had given up because I was too chicken to come clean. Kylie, it didn't matter what I wanted. It was you who deserved to be happy."

Kylie rose suddenly and he let her go. Put his hands on his knees and sat on his haunches.

"But I wasn't happy," she sobbed. And then ran into her bathroom. Wade felt helpless as he watched her go.

* * * *

Kylie stared at her tear-streaked face in the mirror. Wonderful. She couldn't go back to the party looking like this. Plus, she couldn't leave the bathroom because Wade was on the other side of the door. Waiting. Looking hopeful and pain-stricken. She was torn between wanting to slap him and wanting to burrow against him for comfort. She

attempted to fix her hair but her shaking hands fumbled with the clip. *Eight years! Eight years wasted because of a juvenile mistake.* Something she could have gotten past. Something she most likely could have forgiven.

Very few people were sacred to her. Her family and Wade. There were only a handful of people with whom she could put her love above her pride and Wade was one of them. But his trust in her could not possibly equal her trust in him or he would have told her. He would have had faith in her to carry on with him. To go on and build their life and not waste what they had. She didn't know what hurt worse, his mistake or his lack of faith in her love.

The door swung open and Kylie jumped. "Sweet Jesus! How did you do that?" she stammered, backing up against the vanity.

Wade grinned sheepishly. "Lots of photo shoots in war zones. A tag-along assignment with a mobster. Joey Nine Fingers could sure pick a mean lock when he wasn't under surveillance. I did a whole spread on the mob underground. They do love their notoriety. You learn lots of nifty tricks when you work with that caliber of people."

"Well," she snapped, "you could have just knocked."

"Would you have let me in?" he asked, raising a single eyebrow. Kylie did her best to ignore how sexy the gesture

was.

"No!"

"There's your answer," he said with half a smile.

"Wade, just leave. Let me get myself together. I have a party going on down there and I'm up here with swollen eyes and the hairdo from hell."

"Forget the party for just a moment," he said. Wade turned her to face him, stroked her arms with his hands. The contact felt wonderful and Kylie closed her eyes to steady the flood of images that blossomed in her mind. "I'm sorry, Kylie. I know that I had no right to come back here and do the things I've done. I regret my decisions every day. Every day that I spend without you I wonder what could have been. What *should* have been," he added, staring at her with eyes the color of strong coffee.

Kylie hung her head. She didn't know what to do. Give in to her feelings? Walk away and try to forget this whole thing? She'd gone that route and it hadn't worked. Eight years had passed in a blink with no love and no passion. No love that swept her off her feet. Nothing but a parade of nice men who just weren't *the one* and a pervading sense of sadness.

"Wade." She tried to sound strong but her voice came out in a shaky whisper.

"Look at me, Kylie," he said and tilted her chin up so she had to meet his gaze. "The only thing I can ask of you is your forgiveness. I made an asinine mistake. I was a kid but I don't fall back on that as an excuse. I can do the interview, leave town, let you get on with your life. I can do all that if that's what you want. But I need your forgiveness. I have no damn right to ask it of you but I need you to give that to me. Please."

Kylie stared at his worry-drawn face. Something loosened deep in her chest, chasing her anger and uncertainty away. She wanted to say yes and forgive all. She wanted to throw her arms around his tanned neck and tell him it was all okay. Fine. All of it. Forever and ever, amen. They could go back to the life they had before. They could continue on with their plans and make it what it should be. Hell, they could make it better than they had ever dreamed.

A tiny spark of fear quickly turned to a fire when she let herself remember how sad she had been. Inside her, the need to make everything right and the fear of being hurt again twisted her gut. And then there was the issue of his warm breath on her face and his kind eyes staring at her.

Not letting herself think, she stood on tiptoe and kissed him.

Wade's lips stayed pressed together for a moment, his hands fluttering along her upper arms like tentative wings.

Then his mouth softened, and Kylie forced her tongue between his lips, deepening the kiss. She felt him gasp a little and almost laughed. She felt like gasping a little herself.

He moved as if he might pull away to say something, so she threw her arms around his neck and held him tight. Sweeping her tongue over his, claiming his mouth with her own. She felt her anger and her hurt drain away with each dancing caress. The fear and anxiety that she would never be happy again drifted away like dust. This is what she wanted to do, so she would do it.

"I don't know what that means," he muttered against her lips and then scooped her up in his arms, "but it's doing funny things to me. Do you? Do you forgive me, Kylie?"

"I shouldn't," she said between kisses, "but I do. I have to."

Wade pushed the door back with his foot, and never stopping their kiss, he carried her to her messy bed. He planted her at the top, swept the bedding to the floor and knelt between her thighs. Taking Kylie's hands in his, he kissed each finger, her palms.

"I love you," he stated simply and unbuttoned her pants after a moment's hesitation, "and unless you have an objection, I might actually die if I don't make love to you right now."

The fine hairs along her nape pricked with excitement. She

watched, mesmerized, as his broad fingers worked the delicate button on her jeans, claimed the zipper. The zipper hissed and Kylie arched her hips without thinking. He made quick work of the jeans and her shred of silk panties as she unbuttoned her blouse. She felt as if she would burst into flames if she didn't get it off that instant.

"You are stunning." Wade sighed. His hands smoothed the skin of her thighs, feathered over her hips, dipped for one delicious second into her belly button. Kylie shivered, followed by a groan as he hefted her breasts in his palms. Playing his fingers along the sides, thumbing the hard pink nipples. He sucked one into his mouth and her sex became liquid velvet. Clenching. Anticipating the moment when he would slide into her and fill her.

Wade slipped his fingers into the neatly trimmed curls on her mound. Kylie sank back on her elbows, watching him, trying to breathe. He dipped his head to place kisses on her knees, her calves. He began kissing a trail up her inner thigh and her heart stuttered in her chest like an engine losing life. "I'm so sorry," he muttered against the baby soft skin, "so sorry I ruined everything. Wasted time. Stole our future." Each word vibrated through her skin, building her pleasure and need. His tongue swirled delicate patterns over her, reaching higher with each stroke. "All I ask is that you let me make it right. Let me win it back." He sighed, finally reaching his destination. Kylie wanted to say yes, but could say nothing as the silky humidity of his mouth claimed

her clit.

She let him do it for a moment. Tickle, swirl, suck and lave. Her breasts ached for more of his touch, nipples painfully yet pleurably hard. She sank into the sensation of his lips, his teeth, his tongue and the wonders they performed. Then she sank her fingers into the hard expanse of his shoulders and growled, "Not this time, Sinclair. Don't get me wrong. I adore what you're doing, but I need more."

"More?" he said, looking happy and dazed.

"Yes," Kylie said, taking her toes and running them over the bulging fly of his slacks. "And if I remember correctly, I couldn't handle much more than what you have to give." She giggled. Kylie felt free for the first time in years. To laugh with him again. To joke with him as they used to. The fear was still there, lurking to the sides of her emotions, but it would fade. With Wade, the fear never stood a chance. She took a deep breath, laughing a little harder. Her heart was light with the happiness she felt.

"Right," he said, eagerly, stripping in mere minutes. "I don't —" He frowned, glancing around.

"I'm on the pill." Kylie laughed again at his look of befuddlement. "Now hurry up and get over here." She eyed his cock and licked her lips. "I've waited long enough. I think I may have set a record in waiting."

Kylie moaned at the warm smoothness of his skin. She grasped his hard cock, stroking its silky length, running her thumb over the swollen head. It was Wade's turn to moan.

"Sweet Jesus," he hissed.

"Let's leave him out of this," she murmured. "You feel so good."

"Yes. Yes I do." He grinned. "Better than ever when you do that thing you're doing."

"You mean this?" Kylie asked coyly, increasing her tempo. Giving him a little squeeze.

"Ooh, now I remember."

"What?"

"How good you are at pushing me over the edge," he hissed and pulled his erection from her soothing fingers.

His hardness traced her labia, ran over her clit, and finally started a maddening circling pattern around her opening.

"Not fair!"

"No?"

"Definitely not," Kylie said, thrusting with desperation

toward his cock. He was teasing her.

"I give," Wade said and slid into her with a sigh. The length of him filled her, stretching her for just a moment. Kylie sucked in a breath and felt her body adjust to accommodate him. And then he was liquid steel, thrusting into her. His face a mask of seriousness, his eyes dark and intent. "I missed this," he said, his eyes rolling back just a touch.

Kylie couldn't answer around the lump that had magically filled her throat. Tears pricked her eyes and she closed them to steady herself. It seemed like ages since they had been this close. Since their bodies had mingled and danced and arched. She remembered the feeling now. The feeling of being one with Wade. She took in a deep breath and steadied her beating heart. Part of her almost felt as if she were dreaming. It couldn't possibly be them together again. But it was and that made her throat close up even more. She had him back. Finally, he was back where he belonged.

"You okay?" he said against her ear, kissing her neck as he drove into her. Pushing her higher and farther with each stroke. She felt her willing flesh clamp around him, mold to him, hug him with each thrust.

Kylie nodded because she didn't trust her voice. The lump in her throat had doubled in size and she felt a single tear

escape no matter how hard she squinted. Wade became still, his heat hovering over her. She opened her eyes.

"You're crying. Did I hurt you?"

"No." Still he remained unmoving, staring at her with worried eyes. Kylie put her hands to his hips and pulled him forward, pushing her pelvis up and against him. Forcing him to move deep inside of her.

Wade bit his lip. Closed his eyes. Shook his head. It was clear he was trying to control his urge to move with her, into her.

"I'm just happy." She sighed, pushing up a little harder. Her movements became aggressive and desperate. She could feel the velvety head of his cock brushing the hidden source of her pleasure. Heat coursed through her lips, burning in the pit of her stomach as her pussy started a tentative flutter of orgasm.

"You always cry when you're happy?" he asked, giving up the fight and meeting her thrust for thrust. He bent and licked first one hard nipple, then the other. Kylie cried out quietly and pumped her hips, opened her thighs wider. Anything to allow him to push into her as far as he could. Anything to let him fill her up to her very center.

"Only if I'm very, very happy," she stammered as another soft echo of pleasure resonated through her body. "Oh,

Wade. I'm so close. I'm right there. I need—"

Before she could finish the sentence, thick muscled forearms slid under her knees, hiking her legs high. Wade gripped her ankles, taking a moment to nibble on one hard enough to provoke a gasping laugh from Kylie. Then he settled her ankles on his wide shoulders, thrust his hands under her hips. Kylie stared into his eyes and his intent was clear. He was right there with her, teetering on the edge of orgasm. "Come with me, Miss Kylie. I've waited for this for what seems like an eternity."

The words lifted her higher, pushed her to the razor's edge of release. Wade twisted his hand beneath her and cupped her bottom. Tracing feather-light patterns on her skin. He brushed a finger over the tight bud of her anus and Kylie felt the bundle of nerves there sing. She felt her sex quiver, clamp, and tighten as a flood of warm euphoria spread like wildfire through her blood.

"There's my girl." He sighed, his pace quickening, his face growing dark. "Come with me," he said and this time it was a command. Wade bucked his hips, growling out her name, driving into her with a force that slid her along the bed. The sound of her name tearing out of his throat did her in.

Kylie sank into the orgasm. Her body clutched at him, milked him. With a final cry Wade came, and for the first time Kylie understood what it was to feel a man empty into

her. She could feel his warmth as he spilled into her, she was so sensitive. The hot liquid mingling of his body with hers. More tears came but they were accompanied by laughter.

Wade lowered himself gently to her. He kissed her lips softly. Kissing a line along her nose, over her eyelids, finally resting his parted lips against her temple. His body was warm and hard and covered hers completely. Kylie let out a little sigh as ripples of pleasure continued to work through her. She felt warm inside and out. And safe. Safe for the first time in years.

"I think we're going to have a lot of explaining to do," he said, before kissing her hair and nuzzling her neck. Wade rose up on his elbows and met her gaze. "Those were really tears of happiness?"

Kylie nodded and bit her lip to shield a smile. He was worried. "Honest to goodness."

"Because the thought of me hurting you again, in any way, is too much for me. I don't ever want to hurt you again."

Kylie let her fingers trace his full lower lip. She arched up, kissing him full on the mouth, forcing him to open to her. She kissed him for a long moment. Pulling back, she said, "The only way that's going to happen is if you leave again. I know you have a demanding job but we can work

something out. I don't expect you to—"

"I rented an apartment by my folks," he blurted, looking sheepish.

"You did?"

"I was fully prepared to give it up if you wanted me to go. It was all up to you. I came here hoping to fix this. Fix us. But if it didn't work, I wasn't going to force you to live five minutes from me."

"So you came with an agenda?" Kylie smiled.

"You. You were my agenda."

"I think you should keep the apartment. Maybe one day you won't need it anymore."

"Don't tease a man, Kylie." He grinned but just beneath the surface Kylie could see hope.

"Let's see how it goes. I think I may have plenty of room here for possibly having a roommate one day. I only have one rule."

"What's that?" He rolled off her and Kylie's heart broke just a little as his cock slid from her.

She snuggled back against him and said softly, "Trust.

That's my rule. You have to always trust me. Trust me with the truth. Trust that I love you. Trust in what we're going to rebuild."

"I can live with that rule," he said, before licking the nape of her neck. Laughing at the exaggerated shiver it provoked. "In fact, I love that rule."

"Good. I know you're famous and all but even you have to play by the rules," Kylie said. She reached back, playing her palm along his long, lean thigh.

"Don't forget we have an interview to do day after tomorrow," he muttered against her neck and she laughed at the vibration.

"We could start now." She sighed.

"Shoot."

"Tell me, Pix, what's your favorite pastime?"

"How about if I show you," Wade said with a sly grin as he flipped her onto her back. Then he squirmed his way down her body, talented tongue lashing out every few inches. "I prefer full contact sports," he said, blowing a soft breath against her already engorged clit.

"Oooh, I have heard rumors about you."

"Like what?" he mumbled, running his tongue over her labia, laving her just hard enough to make her arch her back and squirm.

"That you're a real man's man," she gasped, praying he would do it again.

"I prefer to be a real woman's man. This woman." He sighed and flipped her legs over his wide shoulders. Then he dipped his head and feasted.

Kylie let herself rise up on the sensation of his hot lips on her sex. He suckled her clit gently and then attacked with sensuous licks, nuzzles, and swirls. Kylie grabbed fistfuls of hair, way past the point of manners. She bucked her hips, greedily shoving her pussy against his mouth.

Wade chuckled sinfully and rose to the challenge. He met her open-mouthed, sucking her in, exploring each crevice of rosy skin. Kylie let the sensation swallow her. Nothing but heat and pleasure. When he drove a broad finger into her, sliding through her creamy fluids, she fisted her hands in the sheets and let go.

"Wade!" His name ripped out of her throat propelled by the pleasure he had inspired. She didn't have time to feel foolish at the cliché of crying his name as wave after wave of delicious release rocketed through her.

Wade coaxed each drop of pleasure from her. Lapping her

gently with the flat of his tongue.

When her trembling settled and her breathing slowed, he grinned up at her from between her parted thighs. "That, Miss Kylie, is my favorite pastime."

"Wonderful," she giggled, "but I don't think I can print that."

He lay down next to her and pulled her close, wrapping his lean body around hers. Kylie had never felt happier. Safer. "Well, we have all night to come up with a pastime suitable for public consumption. Give me ten minutes and I'll show you my second favorite pastime and tell me what you think."

Kylie nudged her hand between her bottom and his hips. She took his cock in her hand and felt him jump in her palm. "Ten minutes?" She snickered, giving him a squeeze followed by a stroke. After a few of those he grew hard in her hand. Pliable steel with a head of satin.

Wade hissed in air as she thumbed his tip, feeling the slick pre-cum that had already gathered there. His hips bucked as he pumped into her fist, his breath hot on her neck.

"That seemed more like ten seconds." Kylie giggled.

"You bring out the animal in me," he growled and flipped her. Kylie squealed as Wade drove into her in one long, satisfying thrust. "Pastime number two," he grunted, filling her once again to her core. "Think you can print it?"

With each stroke Kylie felt her body clench, her willing sheath spasmed with the prospect of another orgasm. "Don't think so," she sighed, "but we'll just have to keep trying. It'll have to wait though," she gasped as a flower of pure bliss unfolded low in her belly, "we have a party to get back to."

* * * *

They both did their best to be presentable. Kylie felt her mother's eyes on her the moment she rejoined the party. No one else was paying attention. Not even Fawn who was over in the corner chatting with their cousin Michael. But Carole's eyes flitted from Kylie to Wade and back again. She pulled Kylie to the side.

Kylie felt herself blush in her mother's presence and tried to contain her smile.

"It's snowing!" Carole said with a grin. "You know what you always say about snow?"

Kylie felt her blush grow deeper. Her cheeks were heated but her heart was full. "It's like a brand new beginning. A clean slate. Everything fresh and white," Kylie dutifully said.

Carole nodded. "And you have never been more right. I take it you two have worked things out? Or at least are on your way to working things out? You both seem pretty ...

rejuvenated." She winked.

"Mom. I don't know what you think," Kylie lied through her teeth, "but I would never do that at your party."

"Oh, I know that, honey. I just think you two are headed in the right direction now. Mother's instinct. You can finally have what your father and I have. If you play your cards right."

"We'll see, Mom." Kylie sighed. She was beyond embarrassed.

"Well, again, since it is my special night, I will say mother's intuition." Carole smoothed Kylie's hair and kissed her cheek. "Thank you for this. It's wonderful. And by the way, honey..."

"Yes?"

"Your blouse is on inside out. You might want to fix that."

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About the Author

Sommer Marsden lives in Maryland with her family and her red wiener dog. When she's not writing smut, she can be found walking the fat dog, watching movies, hanging out with her kids, baking, reading, emailing, or in the downward dog position (that would be yoga). She has been published extensively in print anthologies and online. She loves to hear from readers and writers and can be contacted at hot4sommer@yahoo.com. She invites you to visit smutgirl.blogspot.com/ and www.freewebs.com/sommermarsden for updates, blogs, and general chatter. Or if you would like to be her friend, go to www.myspace.com/sommermarsden.

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